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ABSTRACT

Students do not always make choices that adults agree with in their choice of school dress. Dress-code issues are explored in this Research Roundup, and guidance is offered to principals seeking to maintain a positive school climate. In "Do School Uniforms Fit?" Kerry White discusses arguments for and against school uniforms and summarizes the state of research in this area. Deborah Elder evaluates the implementation and effects of a mandatory uniform policy at two middle schools in "Evaluation of School Uniform Policy at John Adams and Truman Middle Schools for Albuquerque Public Schools." Todd DeMitchell and colleagues, in "Dress Codes in the Public Schools: Principals, Policies, and Precepts," report on principals' views on dress codes and look at sample policies. In "School Uniforms: Can Voluntary Programs Work? Experimenting in an At-Risk School," Richard Dougherty describes the adoption of a voluntary uniform policy at a middle school. Benjamin Dowling-Sendor examines a school-uniform case and discusses legal elements. (RT)

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Research roundup

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Dress Codes and Uniforms

Linda Lumsden and Gabriel Miller

When left to decide what clothes to wear to school, students do not always make choices that adults agree with. While the majority may at least minimally conform to adults' ideas about what's appropriate, a few may clearly push the limits. Some may arrive at school in T-shirts that bear slogans or images promoting drugs and alcohol, or that display a variety of messages that conflict with values the schools are trying to promote. Others may swagger around the halls in gang-related garb. Still others may show up in sexually provocative clothing. These issues, as well as a desire to minimize socioeconomic tensions between the "haves" and "have nots," have spurred some schools to adopt more stringent dress codes or to require students to wear uniforms.

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Concerns about school safety have also prompted interest in strict dress codes or school uniforms. As the U.S. Department of Education's *Manual on School Uniforms* notes, "Uniforms by themselves cannot solve all of the problems of school discipline, but they can be one positive contributing factor to discipline and safety."

But while administrators have concerns about school violence, they also have concerns about potential lawsuits. Just how much leeway do administrators have in regulating what students wear? How far does student freedom of expression extend? What elements can make a school's dress-related policies more likely to survive legal challenges and to engender support (or at least acceptance) from students and parents?

Although many of these questions may never have definitive answers, the works reviewed here explore some of these issues and offer guidance to principals whose goal is to maintain a school climate that effectively fosters learning, safety, a sense of community, and respect for self and others.

Kerry White discusses arguments for and against school uniforms and summarizes the state of research in this area.

Deborah Elder evaluates the implementation and effects of a mandatory uniform policy at two middle schools in an impoverished community.

Todd DeMitchell and colleagues report on a survey of principals' views on dress codes and uniforms, look at sample policies, and outline legal issues related to regulating student dress.

Richard Daugherty describes the adoption of a voluntary uniform policy at a middle school and the level of compliance over time.

Benjamin Dowling-Sendor examines a recent school uniform case and discusses elements that can help schools survive legal challenges.

White, Kerry A. **"Do School Uniforms Fit?"** *The School Administrator* 57:2 (February 2000): 36-40. EJ 599 101. *Available from:* AASA Customer Service, 203-875-0748.

According to White, while only a few public schools were "experimenting with uniforms" a decade ago, currently "nearly half of the nation's big urban school systems have adopted

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school uniform policies for all or some of their schools." In a 10-state survey of elementary and middle school principals conducted two years ago by the National Association of Elementary School Principals and the clothing company Lands' End, 11 percent of respondents said that their schools mandate uniforms, and another 15 percent were considering such a policy. Other recent surveys indicate that support for uniforms is growing among parents as well. In one survey, 56 percent of parents said they would support a school uniform policy.

When it comes to the effects of school uniforms, the research "has been inconclusive or mixed," says White. Much of the debate between supporters and opponents is based on anecdotal reports rather than well-designed studies. Some authors contend that uniforms lessen emphasis on fashion, reduce the financial burden of low-income families, and promote peer acceptance, school pride, and learning. Others aren't convinced. They compare adopting a uniform policy to applying a fresh coat of paint to a crumbling building—it's very visible but doesn't address the underlying problems.

Opposition to uniforms is often based more on civil rights concerns than on the lack of solid research demonstrating benefits. Many opponents believe that dictating what students wear to school violates their constitutional right to freedom of expression. While legal decisions regarding uniforms have been mixed, some predict that courts will be more "friendly" toward uniform policies as judges become aware of schools' safety concerns and disciplinary issues.

Elder, Deborah L. **Evaluation of School Uniform Policy at John Adams and Truman Middle Schools for Albuquerque Public Schools.** February 1999. 37 pages. ED 453 580. *Available from:* ERIC Document Reproduction Service, 7420 Fullerton Rd., Suite 110, Springfield, VA 22153-2852. $14.50. 1-800-443-3742.

Although many private schools require their students to wear school uniforms, mandatory policies in public schools are relatively rare. The public schools that have pioneered such policies provide learning laboratories for other schools to study the effects of uniforms.

Beginning in the fall of 1998—under a policy initiated by parents—students at John Adams and Truman Middle Schools in Albuquerque were required to wear tuck-in polo shirts and khaki pants or skirts. Elder reports on an evaluation of this policy that used interviews, focus groups, and surveys, along with data on discipline referrals and numbers of students achieving honor-roll status.

During the first semester of the 1998-99 school year, both schools experienced a clear improvement in student conduct from the previous year. At John Adams Middle School, discipline referrals fell from 1,565 during the first semester of the previous year to 405. At Truman, referrals dropped from 1,139 to 850.

Students, teachers, and parents stated in interviews that "uniforms place all students on an equal level," Elder writes. "Students who may be immediately labeled by peers and staff no longer stand out."

The percentage of students who made the honor roll increased at John Adams from 31.4 percent to 43.3 percent. At Truman, however, there was a negligible decrease in the percentage of honor-roll students.

Survey data showed that 75 percent of parents and 89 percent of staff supported uniforms and believed they decreased violence, theft, and gang activity. Although only 15 percent of students supported uniforms, 59 percent agreed that "school uniforms help school officials identify trespassers on campus."

Elder notes that both schools implemented other changes in instruction and administration at the same time the uniform policy went into effect, so is not possible to attribute the positive results solely to the uniform policy. Nevertheless, "perceptions of parents and staff are very powerful influences on a school," she concludes, and "when a school community believes a school to be good, the school improves."

DeMitchell, Todd A.; Fossey, Richard; and Cobb, Casey. **"Dress Codes in the Public Schools: Principals, Policies, and Precepts."** *Journal of Law & Education* 29:1 (January 2000): 31-49. EJ 606 474. *Available from: Journal of Law & Education,* Jefferson Law Book Company, 2100 Huntingdon Ave., Baltimore, MD 21211.

Aware that the voice of the nation's principals was largely missing from the debate over dress codes in public schools, DeMitchell, Fossey, and Cobb surveyed 240 principals who were randomly selected from a national directory and equally grouped in elementary schools, middle/junior high schools, and high schools. Nearly two-thirds responded and some sent copies of their dress-code policies for the researchers to analyze.

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The principals expressed strong support for dress codes, with 85 percent reporting that dress codes were needed at their schools. Most expressed the belief that dress codes "improve student behavior, reduce peer sexual harassment, prepare students for the work world, and are worth the trouble that it takes to enforce."

The researchers note that principals' opinions varied somewhat with their schools' grade levels and locations. While high school principals expressed greatest support for dress codes, but took a dim view of school uniforms, middle school principals indicated the strongest support for mandatory school uniforms.

"Principals in rural areas showed greater support for dress codes than principals in suburban and urban schools. Yet the reverse was true for mandatory uniforms. Urban principals showed greater support for uniforms, followed by suburban and then rural principals," say the authors.

More than half the principals reported that their schools had formal dress-code policies that usually prohibited halters, low-cut tops, tank tops, low-riding pants, wallet chains, sunglasses, headgear, and exposed undergarments. Codes also often prohibited clothing with advertisements or depictions of drugs, alcohol, and tobacco products, or displays of offensive messages. Some codes contain requirements that hair be clean and well-groomed, and that clothes be clean, neat, and properly fastened.

Although the principals clearly favored dress codes, they acknowledged having some doubts about the constitutionality of restrictions on student dress. In response to this concern, the authors explain at length that the nation's courts have repeatedly given school authorities wide latitude to enforce dress codes that preserve order in schools. A principal's interest in enforcing dress regulations that "teach community values and promote school discipline" takes precedence over a student's right to wear gang-related or sexually provocative clothing, say the authors.

Daugherty, Richard. **"School Uniforms: Can Voluntary Programs Work? Experimenting in an At-Risk School."** In *2001: A Legal Odyssey*. Papers of the 47th Education Law Association Conference, Albuquerque, New Mexico, November 15-17, 2001. Dayton, Ohio: Education Law Association. EA 031 503. *Available from*: Education Law Association, 300 College Park-0528, Dayton, OH 45469. $1.30 plus $1.00 shipping and handling. 937-229-3589.

About 60 percent of schools that adopt uniform policies make them mandatory, says Daugherty. The other 40 percent opt for voluntary wearing of uniforms. While school boards or school officials usually initiate mandatory programs, voluntary programs often originate with parents.

At Traner Middle School in Reno, Nevada, the parent/teacher organization voted to begin a voluntary school uniform program in November 2000. The principal received the board's permission to proceed, but the "school district did not officially endorse or fund the pilot program," Daugherty reports.

Parents, principal, and staff looked to uniforms as one of several strategies, including a peer-mediation program and a family-focus center, to improve safety and enhance academic and social goals. The school, in a community with high levels of poverty and crime, faced a number of obstacles: low academic achievement, low attendance rates, and high transiency.

Students participated in the voluntary program by selecting their uniform clothing: tops in red or white (the school colors) and khaki-colored pants, skirts, or shorts. Fridays were designated as "casual days," when students could dress (appropriately) as they chose.

To help students afford uniforms, the school solicited donations and a local store offered uniform clothing at a steep discount. "The school also purchased washers and dryers, so students could do their own laundry, and received a grant to transport students staying late for homework or laundry duties," Daugherty writes.

When the program began, the "majority of students and about 70 percent of the faculty and staff wore uniforms, but as the school year ended, participation by students had dropped to about 50 percent," he reports. Although the voluntary program achieved some of its goals, the principal recommended that the school board adopt a policy of mandatory uniforms.

Dowling-Sendor, Benjamin. **"School Uniforms Redux."** *American School Board Journal* (March 2002): 38-39, 47. Available online at: **www.asbj.com**.

This article reviews *Littlefield v. Forney*, a recent case in which parents challenged a school uniform policy adopted by the Forney, Texas, school board. The policy required students to wear polo shirts, oxford shirts, or blouses in any of four specified solid colors, with blue or khaki pants, shorts, skirts, or jumpers. Denim, leather, suede, vinyl, and spandex were off-limits, as were baggy clothes and specific types of shoes.

The parents, who had requested exemptions for their children and been denied, filed suit against the district. They contended the district's policy violated "the right of parents to control the upbringing and education of their own children." The plaintiffs also argued that the policy interfered with students' freedom of expression and forced them to express ideas with which they might disagree. In addition, they asserted that the procedures for opting out of the policy violated their religious freedom by allowing school officials to assess the sincerity of people's religious beliefs.

The federal district court summarily dismissed the suit without a trial. The plaintiffs then appealed to the 5th Circuit Court, where the ruling of the lower court was upheld. In its decision, the 5th Circuit Court indicated that students' free-speech right to select their own clothes is "not absolute," and that this right must be balanced against a school board's stated interests in adopting a dress code or uniform policy.

To decide whether a specific uniform or dress code policy is permissible under the Constitution's free-speech clause, the court used a four-pronged test it had previously applied in another school uniform case, *Canady v. Bossier Parish School Board*.

To be looked upon favorably by the court:

1. The school board must have the power to make such a policy.
2. The policy must promote a substantial interest of the board.
3. The adoption of the policy must not be an attempt to censor student expression.
4. The policy's "incidental" restrictions on student expression must not be greater than necessary to promote the board's interest.

In this case, the 5th Circuit found that all four criteria were satisfied and that the district's school uniform policy therefore did not violate students' right to free expression.

The court also ruled that parents' rights to control their children's upbringing, including their education, cannot override school rules that are considered "reasonable" to maintain an appropriate educational environment. In this case, the court concluded that the uniform policy was "rationally related" to the interests of the school board in "promoting education, improving student safety, increasing attendance, decreasing dropout rates, and reducing socioeconomic tensions among students."

The parents' argument that the opt-out procedure violated religious freedom because it gave school officials the authority to judge the sincerity and content of families' religious beliefs was also rejected by the court. The court's decision noted that the policy did not have a religious goal; did not have the effect of advancing or hindering any particular faith over any other; and did not excessively "entangle" school officials in religious beliefs.

To successfully survive a court challenge to a uniform or dress-code policy, Dowling-Sendor suggests, schools should invite input from parents and students, research the experiences of other districts, clearly identify the goals they hope to achieve, and provide a "concise, written public statement" on the process. □

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